

With some guidance from SCWBC, Columbia small business goes global with its brand of “educational entertainment”

From high school senior class president to president and founder of Auntie Karen Inc., Karen Alexander has embarked on a series of diverse careers that have taken her around the world. Her most recent endeavor – running her own small business – has become a global success with some early guidance from the S.C. Women’s Business Center (SCWBC).

With experience as an elementary school first grade teacher, a sales and marketing executive for Xerox Corporation, a world-traveled jazz vocalist and founder of the Straight Ahead Band, an actress and, most recently, a small business owner, Karen Alexander is the consummate Renaissance woman. Her company, Auntie Karen Inc., reflects this renaissance spirit, combining her passion for the arts and for education with a big dose of her sales savvy. Auntie Karen describes itself as “an educational entertainment firm that creates, markets and distributes products and programs, with a special emphasis on the Education Market.” The company’s mission is to “empower, enlighten and educate through the arts.”

After leaving Xerox to start her own production company, “I was in search of what I wanted to do with the rest of my life,” Alexander says. While rummaging through some of her old notebooks, she found a song she had written more than 10 years earlier for her first-grade students. Alexander showed “The Octopus Song” with Byron Counts of the Straight Ahead Band, and together they set the song to music, which they shared with various teachers and educators. Auntie Karen Inc. developed from the positive reaction from both teachers and their students into the two-person company, president and chief executive officer Alexander and vice president and music director Byron Counts. Alexander and Counts were later joined by Dr. Norma Jackson, director of international programs at Benedict College, to help take Auntie Karen’s educational services and products to South America and Africa.

“The Octopus Song” and other songs became the basis for a cast of characters that educate children in a fun and, given Alexander’s jazz roots, funky way. Olivia the Octopus, “multilingual international jazz diva,” and her Auntie Karen Ocean Band use jazz music to educate young people about topics ranging from ocean life and water safety to AIDS and cancer to the history of jazz music. The Jamaican Yams use reggae music to teach nutrition and healthy living and Bull and Bear, the “Wall Street Duo,” teach business and financial literacy through R&B and blues music.

Olivia soon gained puppet form, and she and the other characters have recorded albums via their human voice actors. Living up to her international diva title, Olivia has been taking on the world, appearing in Venezuela, Japan and Holland and rubbing shoulders (or tentacles) with celebrities like comedian Chris Tucker and the first black Miss Colombia, Vanessa Mendoza.

Alexander's outpouring of creativity, however, encroached upon the business and financial side of the company. So much attention was being given to the creative side that little energy was left for dealing with the workings of a small business. That's where the expertise of the SCWBC and its counselors entered. Alexander learned of the SCWBC, which is part of the S.C. Manufacturing Extension Partnership (SCMEP), via the S.C. Export Consortium and the University of South Carolina's International Relations Council. Alexander first visited the SCWBC in 2004, initially seeking assistance in exporting and in finding a manufacturer for her company's products. However, SCWBC counselor Eva Dowbrowolski extended the scope of her counseling: She not only helped Alexander with exporting and establishing manufacturing contacts like Clemson Apparel Research, but she also assisted her with the Auntie Karen business plan and business focus and finances.

Dowbrowolski reviewed the business plan with Alexander and helped her to narrow her business's focus, then still a broad work in progress. She went over Auntie Karen's projected financial statements and helped Alexander to determine what loan size would best benefit her company. Dowbrowolski also assisted her with the Small Business Administration (SBA) loan guaranty program prequalification, although Alexander eventually opted for a loan through the City of Columbia's Commercial Revolving Loan Fund, a program that supports Columbia's small business development.

Of course, Alexander's passion lies beyond profit, leading her to establish the Auntie Karen Foundation, a global 501 (c) (3) charity and the Community Outreach Division of Auntie Karen Inc. Its mission is to "create and implement a series of reproducible community outreach programs that will empower, enlighten and educate through the arts." The foundation produces reproducible pilot programs in South Carolina communities for global export. Programs include Auntie Karen's Artpreneur classes – which bring artists from diverse fields into the classroom – and the Young Entrepreneurs Conference – a program that showcases entrepreneurs under age 25 and encourages entrepreneurial enthusiasm among young people. The annual fundraising highlight of the Auntie Karen Foundation is the Legends of ... Concert Series, featuring performances by a jazz, blues, rhythm and blues, or gospel artist who has contributed to the history of music. Not only does the concert series serve to support the Auntie Karen Foundation, it also serves to "keep the legacy of African American music alive."

Alexander has made two trips to Biloxi through her company and foundation, bringing Olivia to Biloxi children as part of a relief effort in the destructive wake of Hurricane Katrina. Most recently, Auntie Karen Inc. has teamed with ETV Headstart and the USC School of Music to create a television pilot based on the Auntie Karen characters.

"This is all by design," Alexander says of the growing impact of Auntie Karen. "I'm just a messenger."